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Integrated, place based business support pilot: Evaluation

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Integrated, Place Based Business Support Pilot: Evaluation

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Background

This report presents findings of the evaluation of a pilot project of integrated, place based business support provided by GrowBiz, sponsored by Scottish Government and others.[1] The pilot was concerned with providing a range of support to rural micro-enterprises, and was designed to fulfil a 2019-20 Programme for Government (PfG) commitment to "test a place-based approach to integrated business support for micro-enterprises operating in rural areas".[2]

The intervention provided 12 months' of free business support to rural enterprises, delivered by GrowBiz, operating primarily in Perth and Kinross. The intervention was also specified to involve use of a digital platform (smart villages) to provide increased opportunities for networking, new 'routes to market' and enhancement of digital connectivity and upskilling of rural businesses and communities.

The purpose of this evaluation report is to identify the lessons learned from the pilot which will, in turn, help inform the future business support landscape for rural businesses. This evaluation reviews the intervention delivery and provides insight on how the intervention was perceived by participants and the benefits that they obtained. The evaluation does not quantify, in economic terms, the impact of the pilot intervention.

1.2 Outline of the evidence

This report first gives an overview of policy context in which this pilot was delivered and reviews the relevant literature. The Scottish Government have emphasised the importance of supporting the rural economy. Overall, research indicates that small and micro-businesses are more prominent in rural Scotland than in urban areas.[3] Evidence on Scottish small and medium sized-enterprises, emphasises that growth is not always a high priority for these businesses.[4]

Data collected from participants via the survey (n = 138, 18% of the intervention cohort), interviews and focus groups (n = 18) indicate a high satisfaction among participants with the support they received through the place-based pilot, and highlights a range of features that

[1] Integrated, placed based support hereafter referred to as rural enterprise support provided by Growbiz.
[2] "The National Council of Rural Advisers recommended that a new approach to business support be developed to ensure that the true potential of the rural economy is realised. This year, we will test a place-based approach to integrated business support for micro-enterprises operating in rural areas, recognising the different challenges they face such as access to markets, connectivity issues and employment patterns. The new approach will deliver flexible support that is tailored to the needs of the business and its geographical location". Scottish Government Protecting Scotland's Future: the Government's Programme for Scotland 2019-2020. p. 67
[3] Scottish Government 2018, Understanding the Scottish rural economy: research paper.
[4] Hamilton & Richmond 2016, Performance of Scotland's small and medium sized businesses: insights from the Small Business Survey

made the support provided during the pilot project particularly valuable. Slightly over half of the respondents reported that the support provided was more helpful than comparable business services they had used and two thirds reported increasing their digital skills as a result of the intervention.

The research with participants provided valuable insights on the experiences of certain micro-enterprises with business support and contributed to an understanding of their needs and requirements for support. The following elements of the support were emphasised by participants as being particularly valuable:

- Having a highly personalised service which was tailored and flexible
- Practical advice
- Peer support which reduced isolation
- Help to access funding
- Opportunities to network with and learn from other peers and local businesses
- An inclusive environment
- Support in developing confidence and discussing ideas
- Responsive support in the context of Coronavirus (COVID-19)
- A sense of being listened to

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) show that 751 unique businesses were supported and 159 events were organised. However, fewer than the intended numbers of Smart Village 'digital platforms' were delivered. The reduced delivery against KPIs of the 'digital platform' objective reflects a combination of the impacts of Coronavirus (COVID-19), which made establishing new projects extremely challenging (including unanticipated challenges in establishing effective collaboration and an ambitious target). In June 2020, in light of on ongoing challenges, the project was redirected to refocus attention from the Smart Village enablement to the business support elements of the intervention.

1.3 Principles for future Rural Business support

The results of the research suggested four principles of rural business support for the future.

1. **Principle 1: Emphasise the social dimensions of business support**
   The social dimension of business support was emphasised by participants in the evaluation. This relates both to the potential isolation involved in running a business in a rural context, and the sense in which participants saw themselves as benefitting from the networking opportunities provided.

2. **Principle 2: Listening and understanding to inform a tailored approach to support**
   The research showed the importance of increasing the confidence of participants in their business abilities over the course of the intervention. As many of these participants were starting businesses for the first time, the importance of this should

not be under-estimated. Providing a welcoming atmosphere, and ensuring that participants have the opportunity to meet others in their position, were emphasised by participants as important parts of the intervention. A recurring theme within the interviews and benefits cited was that participation with the provider involved being listened to and that subsequently support was tailored to the needs of the business. This was clear both in relation to the less positive experiences participants had had with other forms of business support and what they cited as beneficial about the approach. As noted above, for some participants, there was a strong sense that the provider understood where a rural business was coming from and sensitive to the needs of participants.

3. **Principle 3: Practical, inclusive support**
   A key feature of the support was that it was practical, and extremely responsive to individual need. Participants emphasised that, unlike other contexts where they may be expected to undertake a more structured processes, the place-based support was tailored and flexible. This has various advantages, including the fact that needs constantly evolve and can be challenging to plan in advance.

4. **Principle 4: Emphasising the business community as a whole**
   As several participants emphasised, supporting the community as a whole was an important goal for business support. Participants emphasised that while individually small businesses may make a limited contribution, a thriving community of businesses could mutually support each other and collectively contribute to the wellbeing of the community. The broader context of this principle is that, in the context of rural businesses, there may be a range of benefits that accrue from business development that do not necessarily translate into immediately measurable economic gains, but can nonetheless have important benefits for community wellbeing.

1.4 Other findings

Whilst some equalities data was collected from recipients of the support that was provided it was noted that it would have been beneficial had a broader range of parameters been included (for example, age and ethnicity, as well as other demographics). However, it was also recognised that this was outwith the requirement of the project and as such any future business support schemes should include a requirement to extend routine equalities data collection.

2. Rural Business in Scotland

Key Points

This section will provide the policy background for the intervention, discuss micro-enterprise in rural areas and the challenges they face. The broader context is that the Scottish Government is committed to a 'wellbeing economy', emphasising that wellbeing and health are as 'fundamental as GDP'. The Rural Business place-based support pilots were designed with the following issues in mind:

1. Rural areas have a higher proportion of micro-enterprises

2. There may be challenges with the current model of business support

3. It is difficult to measure the impacts of business support

4. Business growth is sometimes determined by the owner's appetite or available resource

5. Conventionally defined economic growth may not be the best available metric for evaluating the delivery of business support in the context of the rural economy.

2.1 What was the Government trying to achieve?

The Scottish Government is committed to developing the rural economy in Scotland and this has been the subject of recent policy. The overall direction of travel for the Scottish Economy was outlined in 'Scotland's Economic Strategy', a framework published in 2015.[5] The strategy "…sets out our ambition to create a more cohesive and resilient economy that improves the opportunities, life chances, and wellbeing of every citizen in our country."[6] The key economic priorities outlined in the report are as follows:

- Investing in our people, infrastructure and assets
- To foster a culture of innovation
- To promote inclusive growth[7]
- To enable Scotland to take advantage of international opportunities.

This 2015 strategy was relevant when the pilot was running. Further information in the Economic Action Plan 2019 gives additional focus placed on resilience and recovery from the uncertainty of Brexit.[8] The primary goals outlined in the strategy are as follows:

[5] Scottish Government (2015). Scotland's Economic Strategy.
[6] Ibid. pp. 7
[7] Inclusive growth means that we aim to achieve economic growth in Scotland that is inclusive. This means growth that combines increased prosperity with greater equality, creates opportunities for all, and distributes the benefits of increased prosperity fairly. More information on inclusive growth can be found on the 'Growing the Economy' webpage.
[8] National Records of Scotland Economic Action Plan 2019-20

- Realising the climate enterprise opportunity
- Transforming our support for business
- Developing the right skills
- Importance of every place in Scotland
- Investing in infrastructure and transport
- Team Scotland
- Tackling child poverty
- Ensuring everybody lives in high quality, sustainable, affordable homes
- Building a global economy
- Scottish National Investment Bank
- Unlocking entrepreneurship

In this context, supporting the economic development of rural Scotland, with its specific dynamics and challenges, has been a priority. In September 2018, the National Council of Rural Advisers published their final recommendations to Scottish Ministers, outlining measures to streamline rural economy priorities.[9] As Scottish Government's policy work indicates, rural economic development is a high priority.

It should also be emphasised that conventionally defined Gross Value Added (GVA)[10] growth may not be the only variable under consideration. The Scottish Government have emphasised, in various forums, the critical role of inclusive, sustainable economic growth and 'wellbeing' in the economy, which is regarded 'as fundamental' as GDP when measuring growth.[11] From this perspective, the maintenance and development of a vibrant rural business sector, and its contribution to wellbeing, should be regarded as an important factor.

In 2018 the Economic Action Plan 2019-2020[12] set out a number of measures specifically designed to support rural businesses and drive positive outcomes for people and communities.[13] The Scottish Government's Programme for Scotland 2019-20 observed that between 2015 and 2018, over £119 million has been invested in nearly 1,500 community-based or micro-enterprise projects in the rural economy.[14] As part of this government programme, Scottish Government also committed to piloting an integrated place based approach to business support:

> "This year, we will test a place-based approach to integrated business support for micro-enterprises operating in rural areas, recognising the different challenges they

[9] Scottish Government, 2018. New blueprint for Scotland's rural economy: recommendations to Scottish Ministers.
[10] GVA is the economic measure used to describe the rural economy rather than GDP. More information on GVA can be found on the ONS Gross Value Added webpage.
[11] Scottish Government, Health and wellbeing as fundamental as GDP.
[12] National Records of Scotland Economic Action Plan 2019-20
[13] The Economic Action Plan (EAP) was published after the National Council of Rural Advisers (NCRA) report and was an instrument to brigade activity together that delivered to Scotland's economic strategy.
[14] Scottish Government Protecting Scotland's Future: the Government's Programme for Scotland 2019-2020. P.67.

face such as access to markets, connectivity issues and employment patterns. The new approach will deliver flexible support that is tailored to the needs of the business and its geographical location."[15]

2.2 Challenges of available business support

Business support in Scotland is largely delivered through a range of providers, including Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise (and its predecessor, the South of Scotland Economic Partnership) and Business Gateway, the latter of which is commissioned by local authorities. In October 2018, the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee reported on a survey they had undertaken for the Scottish Parliament as part of a Business Support Inquiry.[16] This observed a range of challenges facing rural businesses, including a lack of outreach to their areas, a lack of focus beyond agriculture and tourism, and a lack of networking opportunities. This resulted in feelings of isolation, and views that it was time consuming and expensive to access the support, particularly for islanders. Key gaps identified included the need for accessible business hubs in rural areas, as well as specific funding for rural small and medium sized enterprises and a lack of recognition of different needs of urban and rural businesses. Key areas of potential improvement included better awareness and signposting of business support, a desire for more 'practical' and 'one-to-one' support, and specific engagement with rural businesses.

Additional evidence shows a combination of challenges facing rural businesses, which include but are not limited to a lack of advice. In 2018/19 the Rural Business Survey (RBS)[17] – funded by Scottish Government and carried out by Scotland's Rural College – surveyed 1,203 businesses in Aberdeenshire, Dumfries & Galloway, the Scottish Borders and Tayside. This pointed to a range of issues facing rural businesses: for 45% of businesses, poor digital infrastructure and connectivity were keys issues,[18] with 21% defining it as a major concern (and 24% identifying it as minor). Staff recruitment comes second – with 43% seeing it as a concern, with cash-flow the third most pressing concern.

Concerning the need for advice specifically, while only 5% of respondents to the RBS regarded a lack of access to business advice as a major problem, a further 20% reported it as a minor concern.[19] While it was the lowest ranked constraint, this is nonetheless

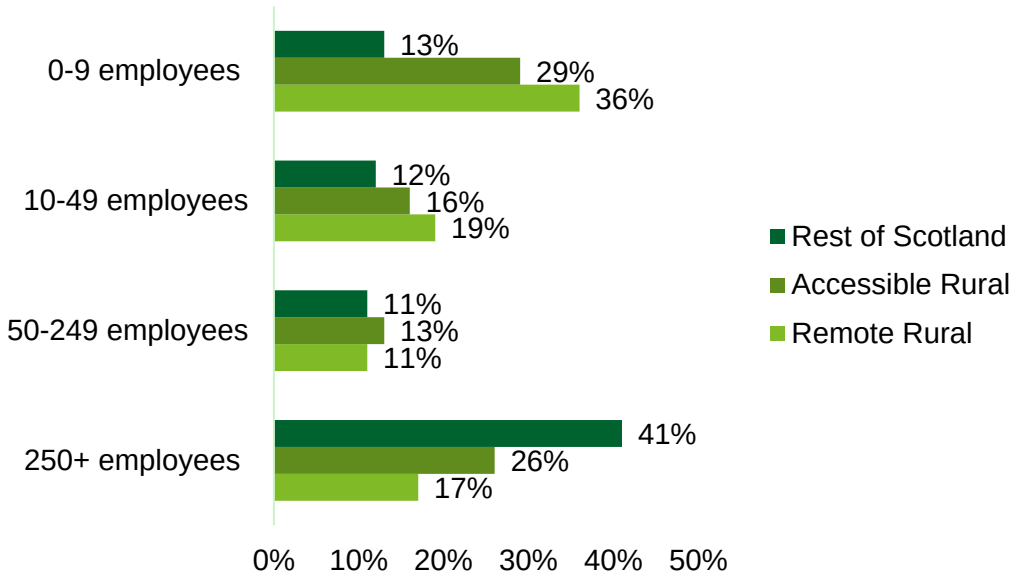
[15] Scottish Government Protecting Scotland's Future: the Government's Programme for Scotland 2019-2020. P.67.
[16] Scottish Parliament. Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee – Analysis of business support survey results. October 2018
[17] SRUC 2019, Rural Report 2018/19: The impact of change on rural businesses 2017-2020.
[18] In May 2016, the Scottish Government announced that they would reach 100% coverage for superfast broadband by the end of December 2021. There have been substantial improvements in the provision of superfast broadband in Scotland as a whole, with a fall in the number of 'not spots' – datazones with no superfast broadband – from 654 in 2015 to 52 in 2018, and full coverage in 54.2% of datazones, up from 21.9% in 2015. However, the improvements in rural areas have not occurred as quickly as improvements in urban areas, which in some cases reflects technical difficulties related to extending broadband to particularly remote areas.
[19] SRUC 2019, Rural Report 2018/19: The impact of change on rural businesses 2017-2020

substantial, and 36% of the respondents thought that business specific advice, delivered one to one, would be helpful, with comparable percentages regarding other forms of advice as potentially helpful. Use of advice was measured in the Small Business Survey, 2019, produced by Scottish Government.[20] According to this data, 30% of rural businesses have sought advice in the last twelve months (compared to 25% of urban businesses). Of these, 21% had sought advice from a business consultant.

2.3 The role of micro-businesses in rural Scotland

A micro-business can be defined as a business employing between zero and nine employees. In 2020, counting only registered businesses, there are 179,460 businesses in Scotland, of which 156,180 are micro-enterprises (or 87% of the total). In rural areas, micro-enterprises represent a larger percentage of the business base than in urban areas: while 13% of those employed in the rest of Scotland work for employers with 0-9 employees, this is the case for 29% of people in accessible rural areas and 36% of people in remote rural areas (see Figure 1).[21] Remote rural and accessible rural areas also have higher levels of self-employment. In 2019, 23% and 17% people in remote and accessible rural areas respectively are self-employed, as opposed to 11% people of non-rural areas.

Figure 1. Percentage of employees by employee size band in remote rural areas, accessible rural areas and rest of Scotland, 2020



Source: Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021

[20] Scottish Government. Small Business Survey: 2019.
[21] Scottish Government, Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021.

There is little research on rural enterprises and micro-enterprises generally. A systematic literature review,[22] published in 2016, analysed 59 pieces of literature to demonstrate the key distinguishing factors between micro businesses and typical small enterprises (10-49 employees). The report observes that only approximately 22-25% of micro businesses were growth oriented, with only a small fraction intending to increase in time. To quote from this paper directly:

> "The studies highlight that the majority of micro-businesses tend to be lifestyle businesses, very few OMEs [owner-manager entrepreneurs] having the ambition to grow the business beyond a personal target income level."[23]

As the existing business support landscape appears to be more geared towards supporting businesses which prioritise growth, the evidence that micro-enterprises may be less growth orientated matters. As current assumptions underpinning the purpose of business support around jobs or growth, may be inappropriate when the goal of the business is not growth,[24] and evaluating those businesses on growth may underestimate the important role these business play.

2.4 How should support be evaluated?

Evaluating business support initiatives is challenging and evidence on the effectiveness of business support is mixed.[25] In a review of business advice The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth found 23 suitable evaluations, of which 14 found positive programme impacts on a least one business outcome, while five found advice didn't work and the remaining studies reported mixed findings on different outcomes. In general, they note that advice programmes tend to show better results for sales, compared to employment and productivity, but results are mixed. Overall, it was observed that "…it is difficult to reach any strong conclusions on the link between specific programme features and better firm outcomes."[26] More broadly, Nesta, the innovation foundation, have characterised the literature on entrepreneurial support as challenging, given the complexity involved in undertaking this evaluation and the variety of factors/time-lags involved. They further found that many recent policy developments in this area have not been evaluated.[27]

2.5 Conclusion

This section has outlined the following points:

[22] Gherhes, Wills, Vorley, & Vasconcelos (2016). Distinguishing micro-businesses from SMEs: a systematic review of growth constraints. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*.
[23] Gherhes, Wills, Vorley, & Vasconcelos (2016). Distinguishing micro-businesses from SMEs: a systematic review of growth constraints. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*.
[24] Steiner & Atterton 2014, The contribution of rural businesses to community resilience. Local Economy 29, no. 3: 228-244.
[25] What works centre: Business Advice webpage.
[26] What works centre: Business Advice Evidence Review 2
[27] Rigby & Ramlogan 2013, The Impact and Effectiveness of Entrepreneurship policy. Nesta working paper no. 13/01.

- The Scottish Government has prioritised piloting an integrated, place based approach to business support for rural areas. Rural businesses confront a range of challenges including digital infrastructure, although advice needs remain prominent.
- Business statistics indicate that rural areas are characterised by high levels of micro-enterprises and comparatively high rates of self-employment. Academic research cited above indicates that growth may not be their primary priority. Nonetheless, support which contributes to their founding and continued development is likely to have a range of benefits to rural areas.
- Policy related research, cited above, indicates that measuring the impact of business support is challenging, and developing mechanisms for evaluating these forms of support will be an important priority going forward.

3. The Intervention

3.1 Funding and costs

This pilot has been allocated £230,000 from Scottish Government, £60,000 of which came from Scottish Government Digital.

3.2 What was the pilot designed to deliver?

The goals of the pilot were twofold. In the first instance, GrowBiz was funded to continue their provision of business support with an extension into a number of different geographies, the specifics of which are discussed below, and to use a smart village hub and smart village digital platform to enable the improvement in networking capability, digital connectivity, skills and capacity within rural Scottish villages. The project had the following KPIs, as follows:

1. 750 businesses supported
2. 50 new business starts in Perth and Kinross alongside 5 new business starts within each area of the project.
3. 150 events
4. 5 collaborations with local authorities or regional hubs.
5. 1 Smart village hub and 25 smart village Portals (10 in Perth & Kinross and 15 in other parts of Scotland)

The first three of these deliverables have been provided via GrowBiz's provision of business support, with the fifth taking the form of a specific intervention.

3.3 Methodology of this evaluation

This evaluation has been undertaken by the Scottish Government, and was developed in consultation with those in the Scottish Government responsible for policies in this area and delivery partners. The evaluation has two primary components:

- A survey of intervention beneficiaries
- Interviews and focus groups with intervention participants

The primary goal of the evaluation was to contribute to the development of 'principles for place-based rural business support' via the assessment of the approach described above to help inform the future support landscape for rural micro enterprises. To address this goal, the evaluation has sought to understand the experiences of those who have acquired support during the pilot period (October 2019-October 2020). This was achieved using the provider's management information, as well as a short survey of users of the service and several focus groups with those who had been part of the intervention.

This survey sought to understand how participants viewed the support provided, how it compared to other business support they had received and what aspects of the intervention they viewed as particularly helpful. We received a total of 135 responses to the survey, which

was distributed by the provider to individuals who had received support during the designated period. At the interviews and focus groups (total participants = 18) we asked comparable questions, but in a qualitative format.

4. What was delivered?

Key Points

During the intervention, the following KPIs were met:
- Provision of enterprise support
- Supporting start-ups in Perth and Kinross
- Provision of events

However, the following KPIs were not met in full due to refocussing work to support rural businesses during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic:
- Supporting start-up formation outside of Perth and Kinross, though some online support was given to business start-ups in the South of Scotland, after the pandemic arrived.
- Regional collaborations
- Delivery of 'all digital' platforms. However, the successes of Perthshire adventure and Perthshire artisans should be noted.

Overall, the shortcomings in delivery can partially be understood as reflecting the unprecedented disruption resulting from Coronavirus (COVID-19). At the same time, they also indicate challenges in extending the providers' efforts beyond their local area and the importance of local relationships, and that additional support may be needed to achieve this. The intervention relating to the development of digital platforms would have benefitted from greater specification.

4.1 Enterprise support

The KPI for the pilot required the provider to, by October 2020, have provided business support to 750 enterprises. Support was provided one-to-one for 511 unique businesses, with an additional 396 businesses attending peer learning sessions. Accounting for those who attended both, this results in a total of 751 unique businesses supported. In turn, there were 2,428 individual meetings with businesses.

4.2 Supporting start-ups

The KPIs specified that 50 new business starts in the Perth and Kinross area should be supported alongside an additional 40 start-ups in other areas. In Perth and Kinross, the provider supported 93 start-ups, with a further 20 at the pre-start up stage. Outwith Perth and Kinross the provider supported 10 pre start-ups and 27 new start-ups.

The pilot had less success in providing support outside of Perth and Kinross. In the first instance, this is not surprising, given the extensive experience of GrowBiz within their local area. All things being equal, the reputation and presence of the provider in their primary location would make it easier to obtain clients in their local area.

4.3 Events

The KPIs specified that 150 events should be provided. During the pilot period, 159 events with a total of 1,939 participants was reported. Owing to Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, events went online in March 2020, with participants using Zoom to participate. It is worth noting that the effective adaptation to Coronavirus (COVID-19) was praised by participants taking part in the qualitative research.

4.4 Collaboration with National Parks/Local Authority areas

The KPIs specified that five collaborations should be undertaken during the period. However, only two have been achieved – in Stirling and the Cairngorms. As the delivery partners noted, there were considerable challenges in effectively working with other local authority partners. This was perceived as a result of the presence of local authority-procured business support that could be considered to provide similar services.

4.5 Smart Villages/Enabling Digital Platforms

At the end of the project, the following table regarding the status of the development of digital platforms was provided (see Table 1).

Table 1: Status of Digital Platform Projects at the end of the intervention period.

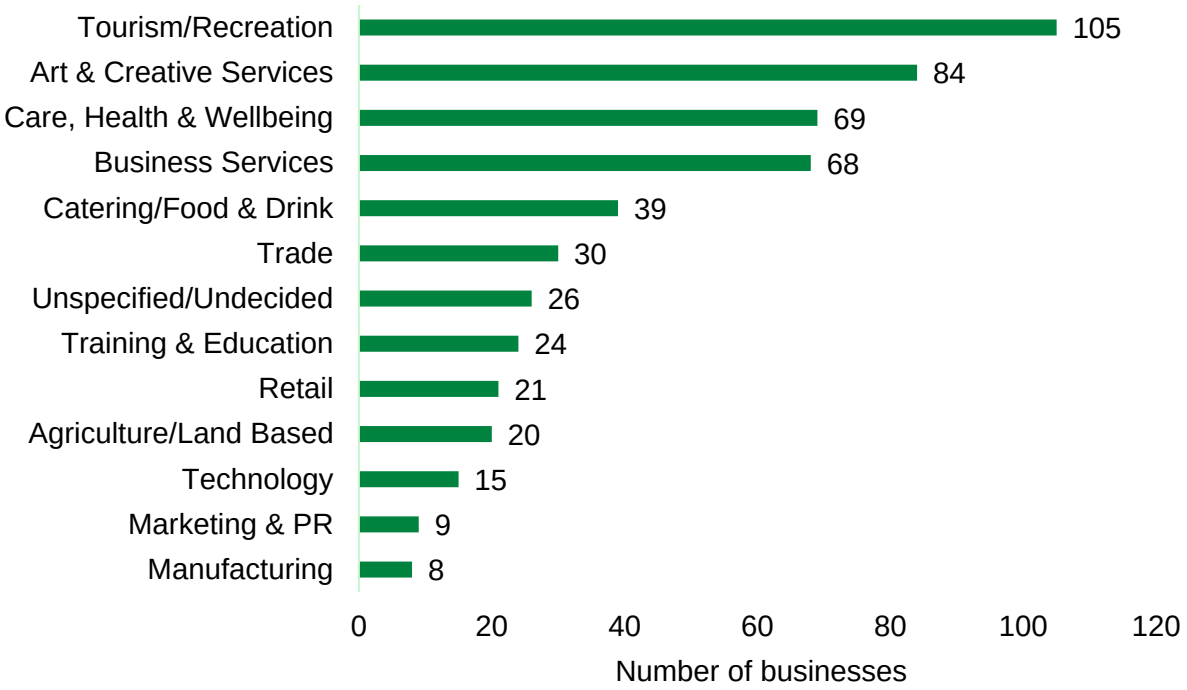
Status	Perth & Kinross	Scotland
Live (published)	2 **Perthshire Artisans** - The website provides an online sales portal for artisans operating in Perthshire, with links to news and workshops supported by participants. **Perthshire Adventure** - This website provides an online portal to booking adventure tourist experiences in Perthshire, ranging from canoeing, 'waterfall chasing', and other opportunities. A key value here appears to be the possibility of purchasing a package holiday based on the services of a range of providers, cultivating both a valuable experience and supporting co-operation among businesses.	2 **Strathyre** - This website providing information about events, accommodation and information about the Strathyre, Balquhidder and Lochearnhead. **REDS** - A rural business directory providing information about rural businesses. The purpose of the directory is to provide a route for small business in rural Scotland to access financial and enterprise support, as well as support inter-business links via learning and networking sessions.
In progress (development)	2 (Meigle & Ardler; Rural Youth Project + four other LAG areas)	4 (Ballater; Braemar; Grantown; CP Creatives)
Early stages/EOI	4 (Carse of Gowrie Biodiversity; Aberfeldy; Kinross; Care & Wellbeing)	9 (Stirlingshire Eastern Villages; Strathard Hub; Galloway Glens; Gatehouse of Fleet; Dunoon/Cowal; Helensburgh; Arrochar Alps; Banffshire; Ardfern/Craignish Creative)
EOI – accreditation	1 (Dunkeld & Birnam)	1 (Strathdearn)
Total: 25 projects	**9**	**16**

4.6 Participant demographics and business sectors

Whilst data was collected relating to businesses that used the service overall, it would be beneficial for additional demographic and business sector data to be collected in future pilots.

However, based on the data obtained during the one-to-one business support interactions the following distribution of businesses across sectors during the intervention period were engaged with (see Figure 2).

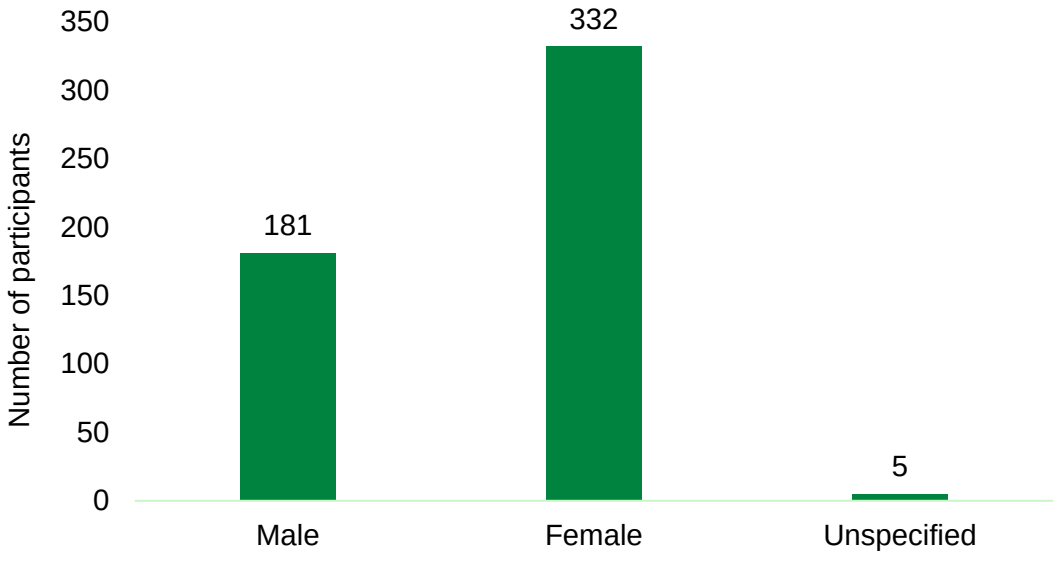
Figure 2. Business sectors of businesses receiving one-to-one support



Precisely half of the total provided here comprise businesses within the Tourism/Recreation, Art & Creative Services, and Care, Health and Wellbeing sectors. Going forward, ongoing monitoring of the sectoral distribution of support will be essential from the perspective of ensuring that business support is equally appropriate and applicable to a variety of sectors within the rural economy.

Similarly, gender information is available for the businesses that had received one to one support. It shows that the support was used more by women than men.

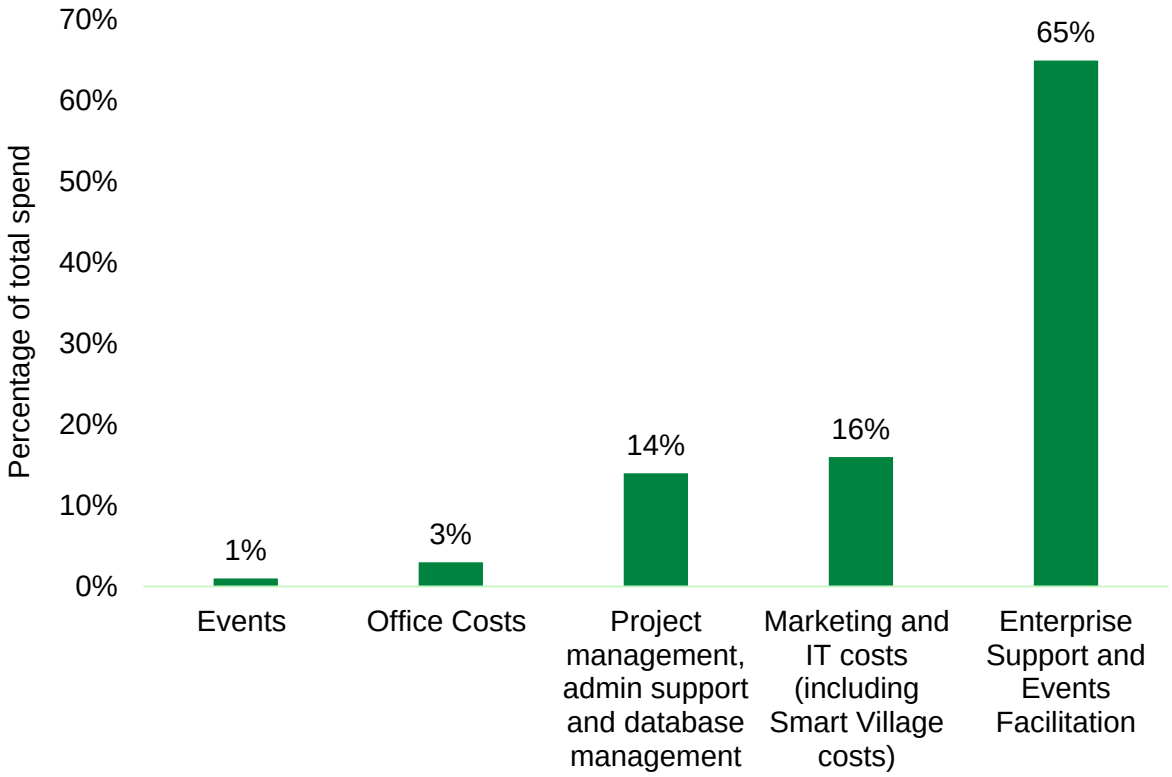
Figure 3. Gender of participants receiving one-to-one business support



4.7 Business support spending

The service provider gave a breakdown of how Scottish Government funding was used during the pilot. This can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Proportion of Scottish Government funding (total: £230,000) spend on different activities by GrowBiz during pilot.



4.8 Conclusion

This review of management information associated with delivery of the project has indicated that:

- The provider delivered many of the agreed outputs, including the administration of business support, events and start-ups in their local area.
- By contrast, regional collaborations and the development of the digital platforms component of the intervention were less successful.

5. The views of participants: Survey findings

Key Points

A total of 135 businesses responded to our survey, equating to 18% of the total businesses supported during the intervention.

A large majority of the respondents reported they had found the pilot 'very valuable'. A further 16% rated it as 'somewhat valuable'. All interventions received strong praise from the respondents.

In terms of the primary barriers experienced in business development, disruption caused by Coronavirus (COVID-19) was the most prominent barrier.

Networking events and peer learning were the most common forms of support received.

'Increased confidence' was the most common benefit of the intervention cited by participants.

5.1 Response rate

There were a total of 135 responses to our survey, which equates to 18% of the total number of businesses supported during the intervention. The survey was distributed by the provider to participants who had used their business support within the timeframe of the intervention. For this reason, while the sample size is appropriate to the intervention population, the distribution by the provider may bias the sample towards positive views of the intervention.

5.2 Participant demographics

134 participants provided information on their age. The largest group of respondents – 50% - were aged between 50 and 64, with 10% between 18 and 39 (and slightly less than 1% were 18-29). A further 31% were between 40 and 49, with 10% over 65.

Of the 132 respondents who listed their gender, 77% were female, compared to 22% male and 1% described themselves as 'other'. As above, 64% of the total intervention pilot that received one to one support were female. This suggests that, while our sample may over-represent women, the higher number of women is consistent with the overall distribution of support.

An overwhelming percentage of the participants - 85% - were from Perth and Kinross. This is unsurprising, given the location of the provider. In addition, 4% of the participants were from Angus, 1% from Fife and 8% from the Highlands; these are all local authorities that directly border Perth & Kinross.

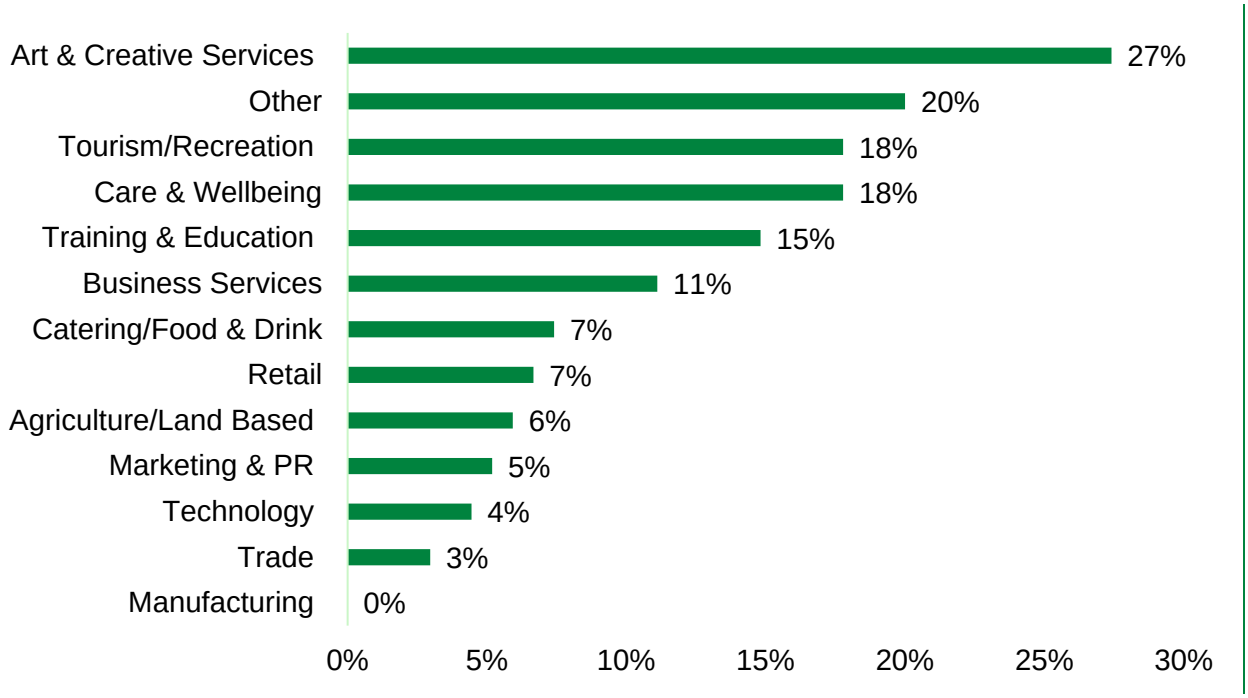
5.3 The business of participants

87% of respondents had started their own business, while 13% were planning to. Of those who had started their business, almost a quarter – 22% of the respondents – had started their businesses less than a year ago. 53% of the respondents had operated their businesses for over four years (approximately half of whom had operated it for over ten years). Of those who had started a business, 69% had no employees, while the next largest group – 36% - had between one and five. 3% of the respondents reported having more than 9 employees – and are therefore small businesses rather than micro-enterprises – and 2% had between six and nine.

For 58% of participants, this was their first business, with 34% having previously operated a business of their own (the remainder being those who had not yet started, who had not previously operated a business). In terms of the sectors in which participants were starting businesses, these are shown in Figure 5. As we can see, 27% are in art and creative services, while 20% said ‘other’.[28]

[28] As participants were asked to specify, other businesses listed included vehicle restoration, transport, cleaning services, health and exercise, performance sport, a driving instructor, community development, media and community hubs and facilities.

Figure 5. The business sectors of the survey sample (n = 135)



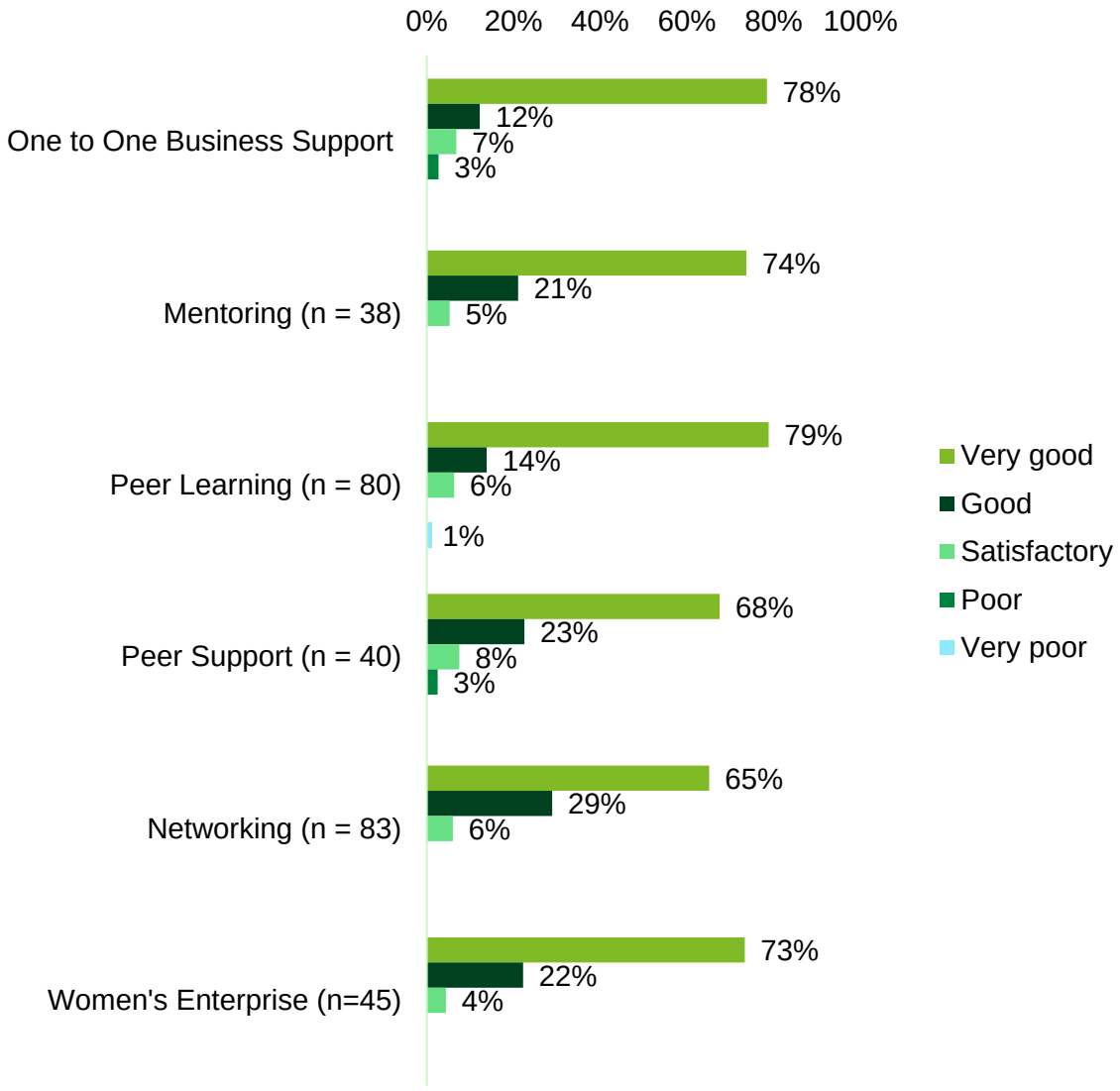
In terms of turnover, over half the participants reported a turnover of less than £15,000 with 14% exceeding £100,000.

In terms of the business aspirations of the sample, less than half – 48% - of those operating the business were full time. While this partly reflects the impacts of Coronavirus (COVID-19) – 19% had suspended operations at the time of the survey – it may also reflects the part time nature of many of the enterprises. 12% of respondents were working on their business in their spare time, and a further 22% were working on their business part-time. When asked about their business aspirations, 74% reported that they intended for their business to be their main source of income. In addition, 54% ascribed a ‘high’ priority to growth, while it was a ‘slight priority’ for 29% and either neither or not a priority for the remaining 17%.

5.4 Overall sentiments on quality

On the question of the overall value of participating in the pilot, a large majority (72%) of the participants reported that they had found the pilot ‘very valuable’, with a further 16% rating it as ‘somewhat valuable’, and only 2% rating it as ‘not valuable’. When asked in more detail about the specific interventions they had taken part in, all interventions received strong praise from the respondents, with ratings of ‘very good’ only falling below 70% in the context of networking and peer support (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Survey sample's views on the quality of GrowBiz services[29]



5.5 Views on other sources of business support

The majority of the participants - 64% - had sought business support elsewhere, in addition to working with the provider. The largest number of these - 49% - sought support from Business Gateway. A further 16% had sought local authority support and 13% had used Scottish Enterprise. At the same time, 37% had not sought other forms of support.

We were interested to understand how the support provided through the project compared to other forms of business support. Overall, 31% of respondents said the help was 'about the same level of help as GrowBiz', while 31% thought other services were 'somewhat' less helpful than GrowBiz and 26% regarded other services as 'much less' helpful than GrowBiz. The remaining 12% rated alternative services as better. While the majority preferred the

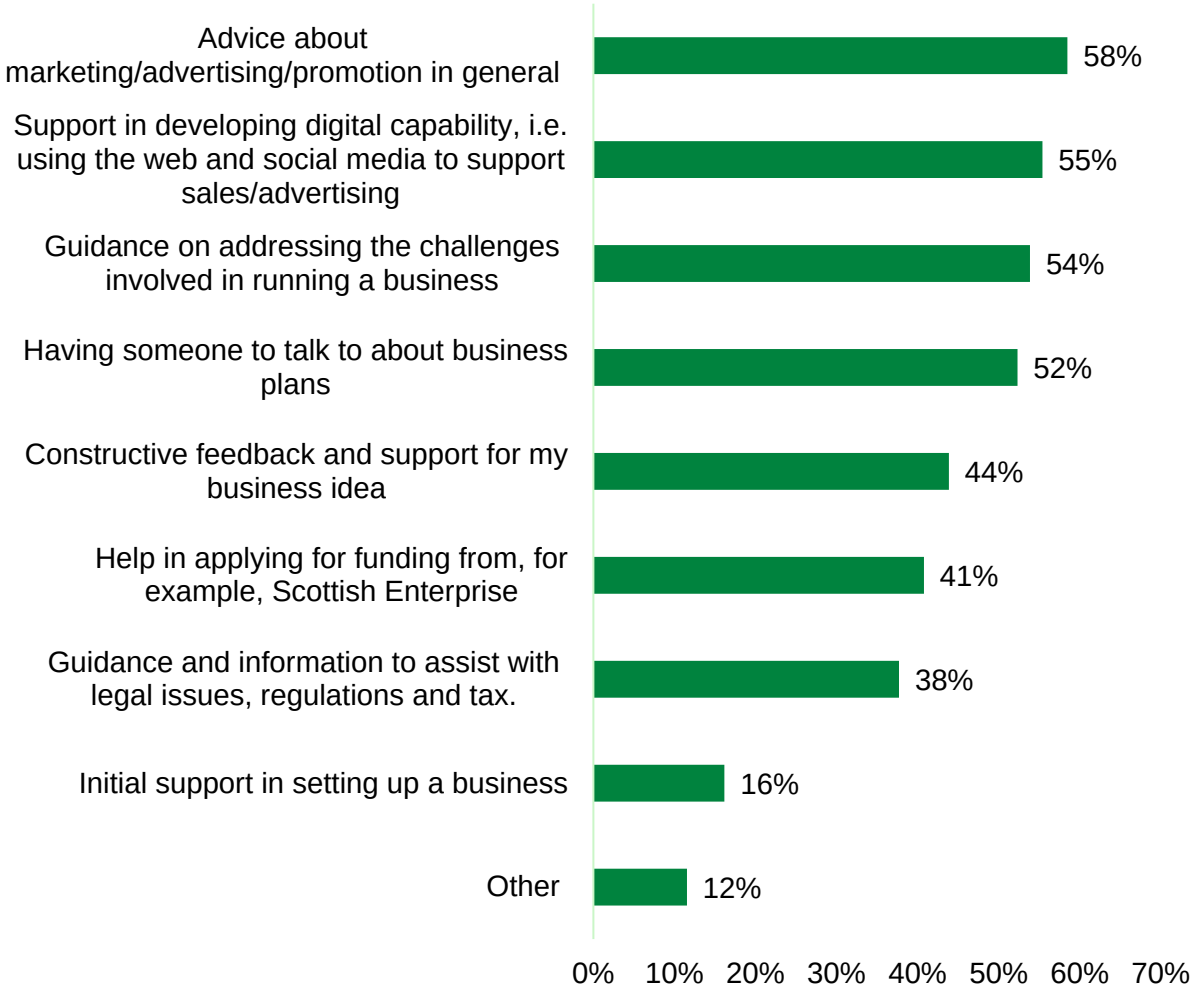
[29] Sample varies by question. 74 people responded on one-to-one support, 38 responded to the question on mentoring, 80 responded to the question on peer learning, 40 had participated in peer support, 83 had participated in networking and 45 had participated in Women's Enterprise events.

support provided by GrowBiz – and the reasons why are explored in the qualitative findings – it is worth noting that, for 43% of the respondents, other services were perceived as either equally useful or better than GrowBiz.

5.6 What are the challenges faced by participants?

The main support needs of the participations can be observed in Figure 7.

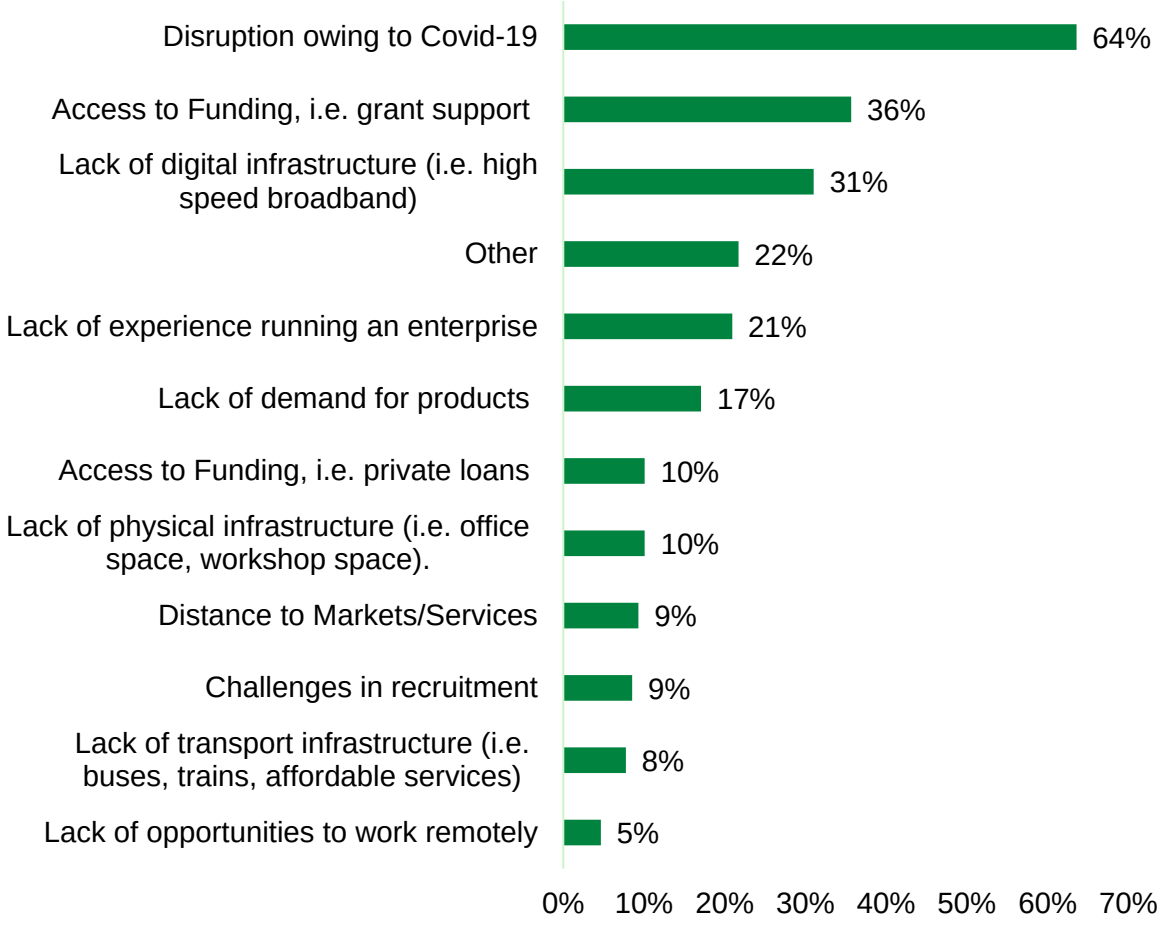
Figure 7. Business support needs of the sample (n = 135)



Participants sought a wide range of benefits from these interventions, ranging from support in developing digital capacity to help in applying for funding. In terms of the primary barriers experienced in business development (see Figure 8), disruption caused by Coronavirus (COVID-19) was the most prominent barrier, cited by 64% of the participants. Some of these challenges are familiar from existing literature and evidence on rural challenges, such as a lack of digital infrastructure and a lack of physical infrastructure. We can also see a range of

areas where policy could support improvements in Figure 8, for example access to grant funding and tailored support in running an enterprise.[30]

Figure 8. Main barriers facing rural businesses (n = 134)

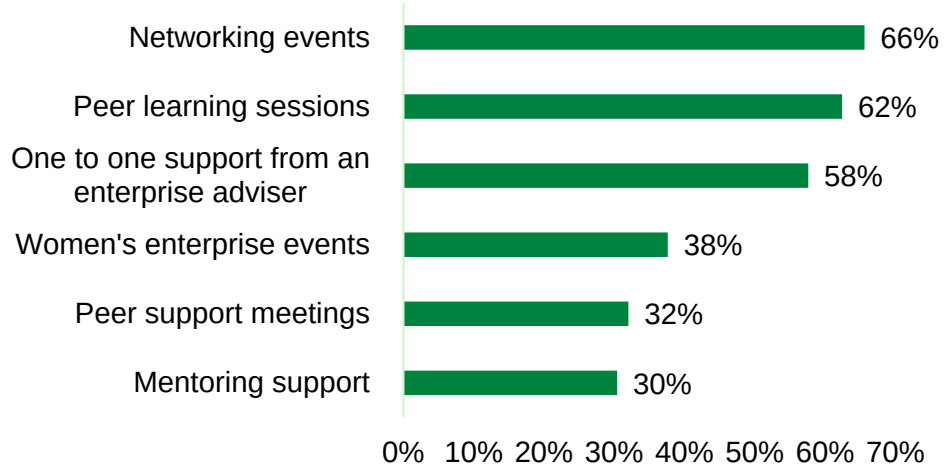


5.7 Support received and perceptions of quality

Participants were asked about the support they had received from the provider. Of these, networking events were the most common answer, followed by peer learning (see Figure 9).

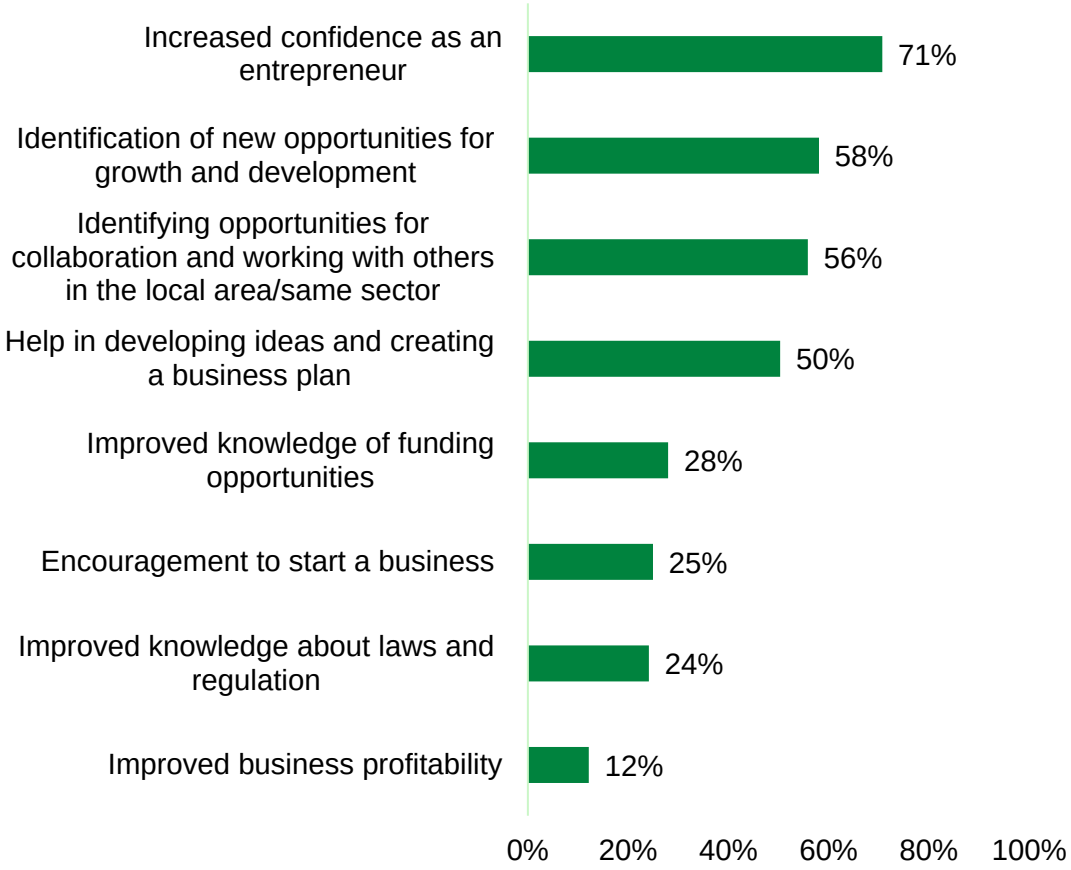
[30] Common concerns listed as 'other' primarily referred to the participant's health, challenges in marketing and pressure on time owing to other activities

Figure 9. How many participants used each of the interventions? (n = 130)



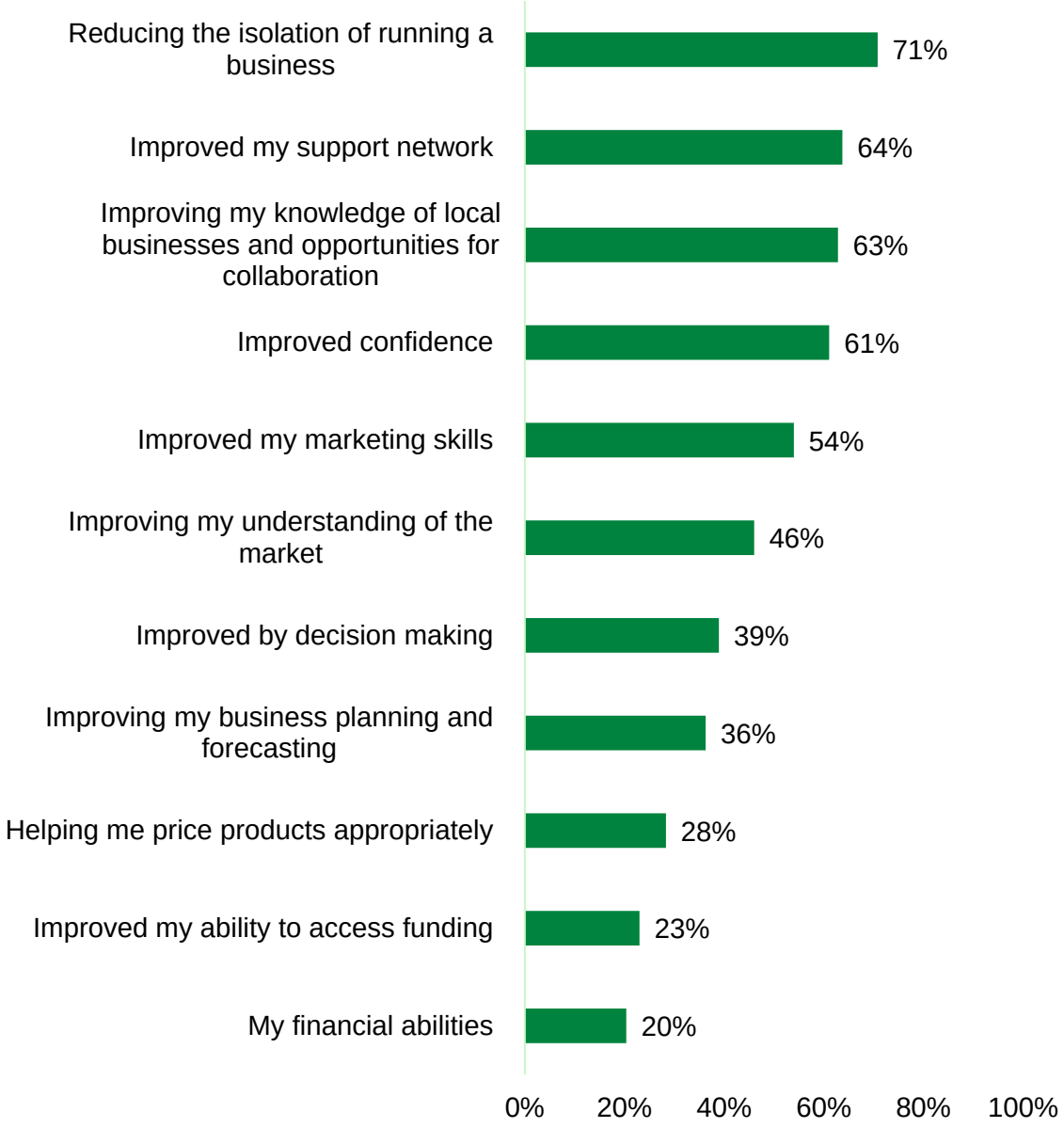
Participants were also asked about the specific benefits that they had received as a result of these interventions. These can be seen in Figure 10 below, which takes an average of the values from each of the six interventions described above. As we see, 'increased confidence' is the most common benefit, which is consistent with the qualitative findings in the next chapter, as is the emphasis on networking and collaboration.

Figure 10. Benefits of the intervention for participants (n = 113)



Further questions were asked about the more general benefits that participants had received, which can be seen in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Main benefits of the intervention for participants (n = 117)



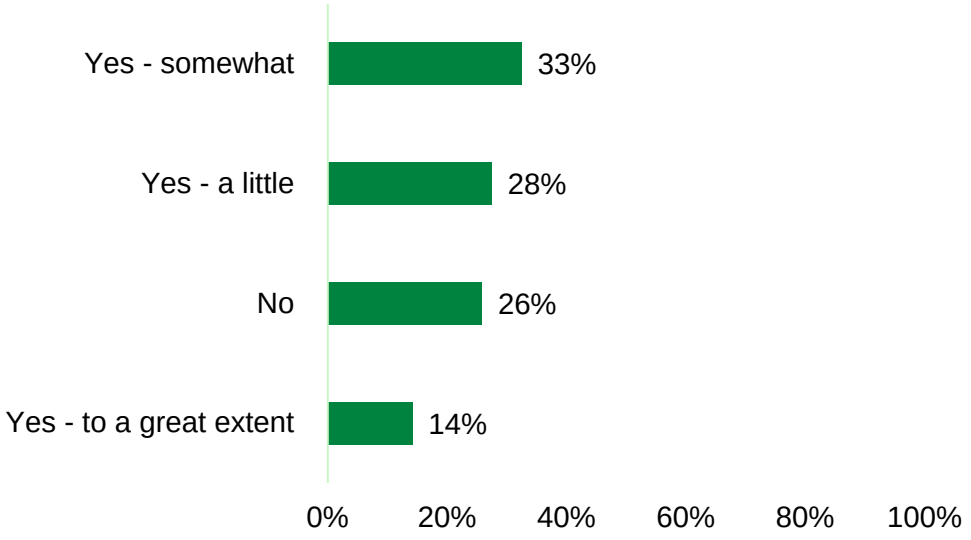
As this indicates, the social benefits of GrowBiz – such as reduced isolation, and improved support networks – were most prevalent. This further reinforces the finding in the evaluation that the connective and social elements of the support pilot were a key part of what made this intervention valuable to participants.

5.8 Digital skills

The project aimed to use a digital platform so questions were also asked about the extent to which the intervention had supported digital skills through the survey. The results of this can

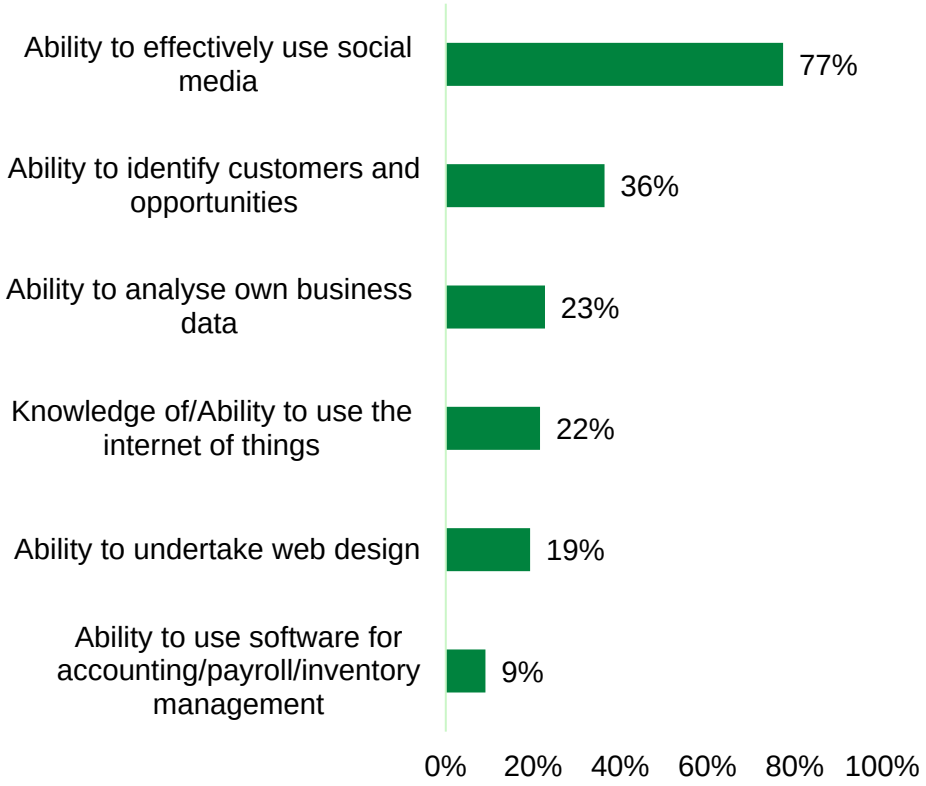
be seen in Figure 12. Just under three-quarters reported that the pilot had improved their digital abilities with 14% saying they were improved to a ‘great extent’.

Figure 12. Did the intervention increase your digital skills? (n = 125)



The specific digital skills learned are noted in Figure 13. As this indicates, the use of social media was, by a considerable margin, the most commonly reported benefit.

Figure 13. Main digital benefits obtained by participants (n = 89)



5.9 Conclusion

Overall, we can see that the participants viewed the intervention favourably and perceived themselves to have benefitted from it. In particular, the survey findings emphasise the importance of supporting rural business people in developing their confidence and reducing their isolation. It is clear that the interventions were well regarded by respondents to the survey.

6. The Views of participants: Qualitative findings

Key Points

Focus groups and interviews were done with 18 participants who had received support during the project.

Overall, participants in the research viewed the pilot favourably. For those who had received support from multiple sources, the pilot was generally viewed as preferable to the other support they had received.

Participants viewed the support they received from GrowBiz as more personal and bespoke compared with other support.

6.1 Overview

As part of the evaluation, we undertook focus groups and interviews with 18 participants who had received support during the project. The focus groups and interviews indicated a number of clear benefits from an integrated, place based approach to business support.

Overall, participants in the research viewed the pilot favourably. For those who had received support from multiple sources, the pilot was generally viewed as preferable to the other support they had received. They viewed the pilot as provided a highly personalised, flexible and tailored to individual need, supportive service with an emphasis on practical advice. A key dimension of this was that the pilot helped people access social connections and support, increased their confidence and helped them to understand the practical dimensions of business in an accessible way.

Additional benefits included networking and peer learning, which facilitated collaboration and greater awareness of other businesses in the area, as well as providing business support and addressing the problems of rural isolation. Networking with other businesses had multiple benefits: as well as helping participants learn more about their local area and feel embedded in the community, it supported peer based learning, opportunities for collaboration. Improvement in IT skills were also noted, which were typically tailored to the business persons' specific needs. Finally, participants noted that the pilot had helped them cope during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis in both practical and personal terms. The views of the participants are presented below, analysed thematically.

6.2 The personal dimensions and nurturing nature of GrowBiz support

In the first instance, many participants were able to contrast their experiences with the pilot and other support services. Often participants were familiar with the other available business support, but in several cases had only limited engagement with them, often because they

found their first encounters unsatisfactory. By contrast, the pilot was perceived as responsive, personalised, invested and welcoming:

> "I didn't feel like I got anything from them [other business support services]. But as soon as I contacted GrowBiz, it was completely different. They're really dynamic. They mould what they provide based on what the bigger picture is – the Covid thing – or what your individual needs are. And nothing has been too much trouble. They've all phoned up just to see how things are, whereas [with other business support] I felt completely unsupported, and anything that I was gonna get was gonna come with a big price tag as well.
>
> Participant 1

As noted, a consistent finding here was that participants viewed the support they received from GrowBiz as more personal and bespoke, as opposed to the slightly more 'once side fits all' approach sometimes seen elsewhere. As another participant noted:

> "…services [other business support services] have been in touch…but it tends to be much more 'I'll just send tonnes of stuff to your inbox', as opposed to this more personal approach of 'what do you really need? So it was still important to me, but it was slightly different'.
>
> Participant 6

This learning process, which involves slightly more steps than simply developing a business plan and having it approved, was felt to be a key benefit of the approach taken in the pilot. As another participant described the process, this time at the level of when they began to take their ideas more seriously:

> "I was saying this [my business idea] to other people, other business people, and none of them thought it was a daft idea. They all took me seriously, and it helped me to take me seriously, if you know what I mean?...There was a confidence building process behind it."
>
> Participant 4

An important dimension of this was feeling listened to. As another participant noted:

> "It wasn't just giving advice. They were listening. I think in communication the most important thing is listening…"
>
> Participant 3

The importance of supporting people and emphasising confidence was also emphasised specifically in the context of the sorts of *rural* businesses discussed here, which may be more likely to be led by a sole person, may involve people starting businesses for the first time, and in many cases based on a project they are passionately attached to.

6.3 Practical support

In addition to being nurturing, the focus groups and interviews emphasised the highly practical nature of the support offered in the pilot. As the quotations below indicate, there were several components to this, including the tailored and specific nature of the support, the pragmatism of the approach, the flexibility offered, the sense of having someone 'on their side', the fact that they could provide help with a range of issues and the inclusive nature of the support, which participants experienced as welcoming.

In one instance, a participant spoke about her detailed engagement with a mentor in relation to identifying her customer base, leaning to source market research and develop a sales strategy. Practical support in this case also involved learning from another retailer by viewing their shop, having layouts explained and learning what they 'didn't know they didn't know'.

> "There is definitely a role in that extremely practical advice…you need a customer facing policy, here is my set of policies, copy/paste, adapt it for what you want to do, but you need to think about what you're going do when somebody comes in and wants to exchange something. Really, really practical advice that I hadn't thought about…."
>
> Participant 4

Further examples of highly practical support include:

> "He gave me a template that he used for his own business, on how he kept track of people he'd made contact with, so whether they were targets, when he'd e-mailed them, if he's had a response, etc….so it felt like really practical, nuts and bolts practical advice, and helpful."
>
> Participant

Other examples emphasised the multi-faceted forms of support that was provided on a case by case basis:

> "They've helped in loads of different ways. I've been successful with grant applications that they've helped me with. For extending my business outwith Scotland and to the rest of the UK and hopefully internationally, so they've helped me get funding… [They've helped me] to acquire some essential equipment, a new computer, I wouldn't have been able to afford it all, so that's been great."
>
> Participant 9

Finally, it's worth noting the value of this support in the context of the disruption caused by Coronavirus (COVID-19), where being able to move quickly was important in providing businesses with adequate support. As a participant noted:

> "I contacted them [GrowBiz] for a couple of really immediate pieces of advice about using the furlough scheme and applying for the business grants…initially the information coming from the government was a little bit unclear…but they [GrowBiz] were really immediately able to help me and answer my questions."
>
> Participant 8

6.4 Training and networking

Another key part of the practical support were the trainings, which were frequently led by people with relevant industry experience and emphasised key business skills, particularly IT related ones. Numerous participants described the online skills they had acquired as a result of working with the support pilot.

> "I knew I had these great ideas, but I couldn't push forward….my biggest barrier was that I couldn't get online and I couldn't make my computer work…A lot of it was on the social media, internet accessibility, and I didn't know where to start. So I couldn't have done it without them."
>
> Participant 2

At the same time, it's worth noting that, in line with the observations above about the need for practical support, participants greatly appreciated the fact that help and training could also be provided on an ad hoc basis, rather than having to proceed through a formulaic training approach. In relation to the need to apply for an intellectual property right, a participant noted:

> "I hadn't got a clue where to start to follow the government guidelines on that…So within, I think it was in two or three very quick conversations with [my advisor] and then I literally filled the form in, just sent it back to him, he checked it…Practically, it's quick. You don't want to wait for a ten week course to learn how to do it. You're doing something there in your business and sometimes you need a quick response, we don't want to be waiting weeks to do something because we've got a plan of something we want to do now."
>
> Participant 8

Another benefit of the Enterprise Pilot was the use of networking events to build connections between rural business people. Participants viewed it as beneficial being able to meet other people and potentially learn from their experiences:

> "Networking and seeing people in other small businesses – particularly women – that was really helpful...If you are trying to work on your own, it's actually so helpful being in groups of people and seeing how other people are doing things."
>
> Participant 2

As well as learning from each other, the networks offered the scope to develop links with local businesses and learn about what's going on in the area, as the following comments indicate:

> "Being able to join the Kinross partnership for the business breakfasts. That opened up different opportunities where I wouldn't have known where to start or where to look for all of these things."
>
> Participant 6

6.5 Inclusiveness and support in an isolated context

Another benefit noted regarding the networking was how *inclusive* the atmosphere was. As one participant, who had recently moved to the area, noted:

> "When I went to the first GrowBiz meeting, you wouldn't believe, it was like 'I'm among friends'! I'm being made to feel as one of them! No one looked at me as a foreigner or a weirdo or any such thing, no matter how I was dressed or how I spoke, they were very welcoming."
>
> Participant 5

Participants also emphasised that they had found the approach to women in enterprise helpful:

> "I think the work that they've done around the women's enterprise network is interesting. It hadn't occurred to me before that women approach business differently – or tend to, I don't want to make generalisations – but there were a few things I hadn't appreciated and I think that was quite helpful."
>
> Participant 6

In another context, a participant emphasised that GrowBiz, in delivering the pilot, had been highly supportive in helping them participate despite a disability that could make this difficult. Participants also emphasised that the peer learning was highly inclusive, and maximised the contributions of the participants:

> "You're encouraged to chip in with your experience and advice. As an attendee it's not all about just the teacher telling you this is how it is. They really involved everyone there, because everyone's got a bit of experience."
>
> Participant 10

This inclusive approach, alongside the emphasis on networking as noted above, was perceived to assist in addressing the isolation businesspeople potentially faced in a rural context, as noted below:

> "As a rural business, it can be quite a lonely existence…for me, I'm quite happy with my solitude a lot of the time but it's good to know that the peer support is there. I think for a lot of people, that has been a really big part of what GrowBiz offers. You know, that connection."
>
> Participant 5

Addressing isolation was valuable as an end in itself, but was also particularly helpful in the context of having people to discuss business ideas with:

> "I think just the discussion, the fact that I could then just discuss ideas about how to extend my business, someone I could go to that I could throw around ideas with and they could then either suggest that that could be useful, or had I thought about this? It's just been a really good discussion, whereas you can feel really isolated if you're a small business in a rural community you sometimes feel like you're working on your own. So actually just having an ear has been really useful."
>
> Participant 1

The pilot also played an important role in brokering information, which can also add to the broader community context:

> "GrowBiz sent out a weekly newsletter through mailchimp, which is invaluable. And much of the information is either dispersed to small businesses…it's a great source of information about training and funding. So they're very present."
>
> Participant 8

Given the disruption caused by Coronavirus (COVID-19), this emphasis on the social dimension of business were valuable:

> "Just from a mental health aspect, I think it was a really valuable source of communication, and just hearing other people's problems and anxieties about what was happening. So, yeah, just on a social level, it was quite a nice thing to be able to drop and have chats with people who weren't whoever lived in your house. So I think that was really helpful…under the radar, the fact that it was keeping people on track with their emotional stuff was maybe something that wasn't talked about."
>
> Participant 9

6.6 'Getting' rural business

Finally, it's worth emphasising the specific rural dimensions of the support. As above, micro-enterprises are more common in rural contexts, and evidence indicates this influences the goals of the businesses in question. A recurring theme in the data collection was that, for many rural businesses, GrowBiz, in delivering the pilot, 'got' the specific and passionately-held aspirations of business people in this context. As one participant noted:

> *"*I think that's GrowBiz's point of difference is that, for rural small businesses, they get it. They really understand what they're about…I think rural business can be a bit ignored…"
>
> Participant 10

Another participant emphasised the point that identifying the aspirations of participants was a key feature of the approach:

> "In a rural business setting, I don't think that that many people come in and want to be a big monster in the countryside that takes over every other café or whatever in the area. But people have aspirations, and I think GrowBiz make a lot of effort to see what your aspirations are and see what the potential is within your market or your sector."
>
> Participant 11

It's important to note that, while participants all wanted to improve their business, this was not necessarily the same as *growing* the business. While some were interested in, in certain contexts, potentially employers others, the goals of the participants were often less straightforward than *growth* in conventional terms.

> "I want to grow the business in that I want to make it more individual, I'd like to enhance the offer, I'd like to target customers with specific requirements. So I want to develop the business, and I'd like to make it less seasonal…but I'm not looking to start a chain!"
>
> Participant 1

Finally, participants often emphasised the sense in which being a rural business meant being part of a community, and seeing the proliferation of small businesses as being an important part of developing the community as a whole.

> "Opening a shop in a small town is one thing. Adding to the range of independent retailers in a growing town, where you've got specialisms that can work together, and actually using local, that's why we're going to be here in ten years' time…the continuing piece is about fostering community businesses."
>
> Participant 4

As another participant put it:

> "It's making people realise the value of business in rural locations to the economy. Because, individually, turnovers won't the same as in the city but, combined, there is a serious amount of value."
>
> Participant 11

6.7 Conclusion

The participants in the focus groups and interviews clearly articulated a range of benefits they had received from participating in the rural enterprise support pilot. These benefits, and the manner in which they were reported, has in turn greatly influenced the development of the rural business support principles outlined in the next chapter.

7. Conclusion: Towards place based business support

Key Points

This evaluation has demonstrated that an integrated, placed based approach to business support (which was provided by Growbiz) has a range of benefits for participants operating rural micro-businesses.

Participants gave clear indications that they perceive this sort of support as valuable, and in several cases find it preferable to other current methods for providing business support.

GrowBiz largely delivered on the KPIs included in the project.

The regional collaborations and digital platform components of the project failed to be fully delivered, mainly due to an agreed refocus of support during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

7.1 Principles of Place Based Business Support

This research has demonstrated that, in the context of rural micro-businesses, support focused on high-growth enterprises may not be appropriate for all. However, supporting these businesses remains a crucial priority for Scottish Government, particularly in the context of the recovery of the rural economy from the effects of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We recommend that future business support in rural areas incorporates the following four principles:

1. **Principle 1: Emphasise the social dimensions of business support**
   The social dimension of business support was emphasised by participants in the evaluation. This relates both to the potential isolation involved in running a business in a rural context, and the sense in which participants saw themselves as benefitting from the networking opportunities provided.

2. **Principle 2: Listening and understanding to inform a tailored approach to support**
   The research showed the importance of increasing their confidence of participants in their business abilities over the course of the intervention. As many of these participants were starting businesses for the first time, the importance of this should not be under-estimated. Providing a welcoming atmosphere, and ensuring that participants have the opportunity to meet others in their position, were emphasised by participants as important parts of the intervention. A recurring theme within the interviews and benefits cited was that participation with the provider involved being listened to and that subsequently support was tailored to the needs of the business. This was clear both in relation to the less positive experiences participants had had with other forms of business support and what they cited as beneficial about the

approach. As noted above, for some participants, there was a strong sense that the provider understood where a rural business was coming from and sensitive to the needs of participants.

3. **Principle 3: Practical, inclusive support**
   A key feature of the support was that it was extremely responsive to individual need and practical. Participants emphasised that, unlike other contexts where they may be expected to undertake a more structured processes, the place-based support was tailored and flexible. This has various advantages, including the fact that needs constantly evolve and can be challenging to plan in advance.

4. **Principle 4: Emphasising the business community as a whole**
   As several participants emphasised, supporting the community as a whole was an important goal for business support. In this context, participants emphasised that while individually small businesses may make a limited contribution, a thriving community of businesses could mutually support each other and collectively contribute to the wellbeing of the community. The broader context of this principle is that, in the context of rural businesses, there may be a range of benefits that accrue from business development that do not necessarily translate into immediately measurable economic gains, but can nonetheless have important benefits for community wellbeing.

7.2 Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations to come out of the evaluation.

Rural micro enterprise support should **include:**

1. **Developing virtual services.** Future business rural support should be digital by design. Respondents reported significant benefits associated with video-conferencing technology necessitated by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the opportunities this provided for them in challenging geographical contexts.

2. **New rural business support should be highly practical,** tailored to needs and pitched at the appropriate level, supportive, and provided for multiple needs. This has been delivered through one on one training, as well as peer-led network training and other approaches. Previous topics provided have included IT skills, social media and practical business support such as intellectual property claims and tax.

3. **Rural business support should include elements of peer support and networking.** This has helped businesses feel closer to their local business community. This, in turn, created opportunities for collaboration, learning from others and mutual support.

4. Rural business support needs to be **inclusive, welcoming, and effective**, particularly at the early stages of the business process when participants were developing their confidence.

Other refinements to consider for future rural micro enterprise support**:**

5. **Improved equality monitoring** should be a standard condition for future rural business support schemes and

6. **Impact measurement:** A wide range of impact measures should be collected as a part of future rural business support schemes. Both economic and social indicators should be considered at the outset given the different growth and community aims sometimes associated with micro-business activities.

social research

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